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ABSTRACT

It has been suggested that policy formation may be influenced by multiple models, institutional theories, rations models of policy, as well as policy perceived as an interpretive problem. This paper examines the history of accountability reporting and educational goals policy in New Mexico and recent evidence from school-level personnel in light of these multiple models. Semistructured interviews were conducted with district and school administrators in two urban and four rural school districts. Two of the rural districts were from the lowest spending districts and two from among the highest spending districts in the state. It was observed in the rural school districts that accountability reporting was most commonly assigned to an existing central-office staffer as an add-on responsibility. Urban districts were able to designate an individual with particular and primary responsibility for accountability reporting. As a result, central staffers in the urban districts were more fully informed about changes to the accountability system. An appendix contains the interview schedule. (DFR)

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Accountability reporting policy implementation in New Mexico: Varied influence of multiple models across levels in the state policy system

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Introduction

New Mexicans struggle, as do the citizens of other states, to achieve a balance among competing choices in educational policy, procedure and practice in the pursuit of quality in public education. Educational policy systems evolve as they are being implemented (Elmore, Adelman, & Fuhrman, 1996) and the policy world is complex and unruly (Cibulka & Derlin, 1998). Unpredictable and fortuitous (or not so fortuitous) events influence the choices policy makers pursue (Kingdon, 1995). Sometimes it appears that educational policies are adopted on parallel lines and even the possibility of intersection can be elusive for extended periods of time as they are implemented. It is not surprising that integrating varied policies with each other, with related procedural mechanisms (what educational administrators say and do), and with instructional practice (what teachers say and do in classrooms) is a challenge that is often unmet in this dynamic and turbulent environment. On those occasions when policies do intersect or when integration of policy and practice does occur, perhaps we should not only be surprised, but consider it miraculous. In earlier work, Cibulka & Derlin (1998) suggested that policy implementation may be influenced by multiple models; institutional theories, rational models of policy, as well as, policy perceived as an interpretive problem. The present study examines the history of accountability reporting and educational goals policy in New Mexico and recent evidence from school level personnel in light of these multiple models.

Public Accountability for Education and Educational Goals in New Mexico

The principle of public accountability for education is as much a cherished tradition as is the principle of local control of public education in New Mexico. However, for a long time, accountability policy and policy related to the definition of educational quality and to the

implementation of educational goals co-existed in a parallel manner. Accountability policy and practice assured that resources/inputs were used appropriately, or as publically promised. Since the state was responsible for the appropriation of the resources to a much greater extent in New Mexico than in other states for a longer time period, central over sight of resources was only logical. As early as 1978, a centralized accountability data system that maintained district level information to meet state and federal reporting requirements was implemented (22-1- 6.E, NMSA 1978). Alternatively, educational quality, responsibility for educational outcomes, and the related instructional practices to achieve them remained the purview of local school boards and districts.

Educational Goals Policy

In 1985, a more centralized approach to educational goals policy emerged when the State Board of Education approved the Building Excellent Schools Team plan (BEST). BEST included over 30 goals for school improvement in NM and required local school districts to share local performance results with their communities. In 1987, the BEST plan became the Consolidating Initiatives for Tomorrow's Education (CITE) plan which consolidated, not surprisingly, the 30 BEST goals into a more manageable number of initiatives indicating a more action-oriented and centralized approach to educational quality and outcomes.

During the period of 1991 - 1997, the State of New Mexico engaged in a process to implement standards based education which more directly addressed the issue of integrating the accountability reporting process with educational planning efforts of local school districts and established an Educational Standards Commission in 1991.

In 1992, a second iteration of CITE evolved to include A Student Centered Policy Framework for System-Wide Educational Change in New Mexico. By 1993, Your Educational

Standards (YES - Blue Book - Standards for Excellence in New Mexico Schools) were developed. In 1995, NM's Standards for Excellence were implemented that included strategic planning by local school districts, the Educational Plan for Student Success (EPSS). The Standards for Excellence-EPSS implementation reflected the following process improvements:

1. a focus on student learning for all students (CITE 2);
2. a shift from point in time evaluation to ongoing evaluation;
3. a shift from process evaluation to student performance evaluation; and
4. a move from periodic data review to trend analysis and interpretation of data.

By 1996, content standards and benchmarks were adopted for language arts, math, and science and by 1997 standards were developed for the additional areas of social studies, arts, modern, classical, and native languages, health education, physical education and career readiness.

For a year, YES and Standards for Excellence were truly parallel systems. In the 1995-96 school year, local districts had two options for accreditation; the YES - Blue Book option or the Standards for Excellence - EPSS process. By the 1997-78 school year, the YES-Blue Book accreditation process was discontinued in favor of the Standards for Excellence-EPSS process.

Each of these implemented changes in educational policy served to bend the previously parallel lines of accountability and outcomes just a bit.

Accountability Reporting Transformation

Accountability reporting policy was also influenced by the development of educational goals policy over time. In 1987, The first annual state-wide consolidated accountability report was initiated by the State Department of Education. In 1989, local districts were required to publish local performance results in the local newspapers. In 1990, legislation formalized the consolidated

state wide accountability report and in 1991, the Quality of Education Survey, an instrument distributed to and completed by parents, emerged as a reporting requirement.

However, accountability reporting policy essentially remained a local prerogative until most recently. While the State of New Mexico may have mandated that school districts publish the 47-item school district report card in the local paper, the EPSS were implemented by district school boards and evaluated by methods that relied on self-reported data and progress assessments. These progress reports included enrollment statistics and analyses of the student population, student achievement results including testing results and drop out rates, financial information, staffing analyses, and the results of parental involvement surveys. Designed to encourage locally developed school improvement processes, the broad discretion given in EPSS development, implementation, and evaluation resulted in widely varying progress reports among districts and the system came under fire.

To achieve greater consistency in school improvement among the districts, the State of New Mexico Department of Education overhauled the 47-item report card in 1997 (McCoy & Weil, 1998). The contents of the previous report cards were replaced with a five-item student-centered report card published in the districts. The five variables the new report card address are student achievement (measured by state-mandated examination scores), overall attendance percentage, overall dropout percentage, parental and community involvement (based on parental involvement plan/goals and benchmarks) and school safety (based on self-report of records from each school principal).

While the newly implemented system continues to be considered in support of locally developed school improvement planning, centralization of information reporting and analysis has

been imposed and the system now includes funded rewards and sanctions for individual schools, not school districts. Multiple regression modeling is used to identify low and high performing schools.

The Incentives for School Improvement Act (22-13A-5 NMSA 1978), enacted by the 1997 New Mexico legislature, mandated that incentive awards would be given to the top 10% of performing schools in the state. Prior testing requirements were expanded with standardized test scores for grades 4, 6, and 8, and the New Mexico High School Competency Exam results as the current measures of student achievement. The standardized test scores and the NMHSCE for all high school students who took the exam that year are regressed on three socioeconomic variables, mobility, number of students receiving free and reduced lunch, and number of Limited English Proficiency students. The schools that show the highest positive change between expected scores and actual scores on the respective tests are deemed "high improving schools" and receive financial incentives of no less than $1,000 per school. About 100 schools are eligible for financial remuneration each year with the total actual amount of the award ascertained by per pupil allocations (presently $81/student).

Conversely, schools that demonstrate a performance lower than expected based on the regression model are designated in need of intervention provided by School Improvement Teams coordinated by the NM State Department of Education. Presently, about 24 schools have been designated as being in need of intervention. While varying strategies for intervention may be applied, approximately $300,000 for each school can be applied to support "improvement schools".

Purpose of the Present Study & Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with district and school administrators in two urban and in four rural school districts in Spring 1999. The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to ascertain the degree of understanding school personnel had of the present accountability reporting requirements, their sense of the changes being implemented in accountability reporting system, the perceived fairness of the newly implemented system and its likelihood of facilitating school improvement.

Two of the four rural districts were randomly chosen from among the lowest spending districts and two from among the highest spending districts in the state. Tables One and Table Two identify some of the key indicators relevant to the districts included in the study.

Table 1 - New Mexico School District Sample - Selected Statistics

School District	Per Pupil Expenditure (Net Operating)	Membership	% Children in Poverty
High 1	$5,504	382	52.5
High 2	$5,332	257	71.5
Low 1	$3,665	3,044	31.4
Low 2	$3,463	2,945	39.0
Urban 1	$4,125	87,253	24.1
Urban 2	$3,824	22,324	32.2

Source: NM State Department of Education

Table 2 - New Mexico School District Sample - Formula Funding Indicators

School District	At Risk Index Current	At Risk Index Proposed	Dropout Rate	Mobility	LEP Rate
High 1	.0355	.0594	.070	.439	.827
High 2	.0626	.0595	.082	.315	.069
Low 1	.0632	.0648	.028	.237	.268
Low 2	.0402	.0660	.091	.464	.102
Urban 1	.0824	.0150	.101	.335	.181
Urban 2	.0807	.0633	.082	.281	.121

Source: NM State Department of Education

In each district, a central office staff member with responsibility for accountability reporting, a high school, middle school, and elementary school principal resulting in a total of 24 interviews. The interview schedule is shown in Appendix A.

Findings and Discussion

Rural Sites

As was not unexpected, it was observed in the rural school districts that accountability reporting was most commonly assigned to an existing central office staffer as an add-on responsibility. As a result, understanding of the specific changes in the accountability system was limited in the rural districts. In most cases, central staff persons were not familiar with regression techniques or of the particular factors included in the regression model.

Among school level personnel in the rural districts, understanding of the new accountability system and the regression modeling that is used to determining low and high

performing schools is very limited at this time. Only one rural principal was specifically aware of regression techniques and the particular factors (limited English proficiency, free and reduced lunch eligibility, and mobility) used in the model. Rural principals demonstrated considerable concern about over-reliance on test scores as a dominant measure of student achievement. The inability of an accountability model relying heavily on the analysis of student test scores in determining low and high performing schools to fully reflect the diversity in home and community factors in New Mexico was a consistently demonstrated concern.

In some cases, school principals were unaware that financial awards had been made in their own district. Most school level personnel in the rural districts considered the use of financial awards as an improper or inadequate means to positively influence school performance. This is not to say that the availability of a financial reward *per se* wasn't viewed as positive, because principals viewed extra resources as valuable. However, there was a genuine concern demonstrated for the effects of monetary awards on equity among schools within a district and rural personnel suggested that the larger or more wealthy school districts would enjoy an advantage in competing for these awards.

Whether or not any school had been designated as an improvement school in their own or another school district was not generally known with certainty among rural school principals. Since rural principals were not well informed that considerable resources would be applied to schools designated as improvement schools, the designation was viewed as punitive more than supportive of local EPSS. A NM State Department School Improvement Team descending was not generally considered among rural school principals as a positive event.

Urban Sites

One of the main differences between urban and rural sites was that the urban school districts have been able to designate an individual with particular and primary responsibility for accountability reporting. As a result, the central staffers in the urban districts were more fully informed about changes to the accountability system than their rural counterparts who had to fulfill multiple roles. Central office staff in the urban districts were familiar with regression modeling, the specific factors included in the model being applied, and the challenges of developing a more highly centralized data system within the state of New Mexico. The mobility factor in the regression model was identified as the most problematic in its construction and inclusion in the model. Urban and rural school districts clearly differed in their ability to devote human and other resources to the centralized demand for increased/improved accountability reporting.

Urban school principals, however, were more similar to their rural counterparts. In the urban school districts, principals demonstrated a similar limited level of understanding of the new accountability system. Generally, urban principals were not familiar with regression modeling and could not accurately identify specific factors in the model being applied. What was most interesting is that urban principals were more likely to have been involved in meetings regarding the new accountability system, had received more extensive materials, and had quite concrete perceptions about the regression model factors - just inaccurate perceptions. A specific example is the principal who identified the importance of the inclusion of the number of special education students as a factor in the new regression modeling as one positive improvement even though this is not a factor in the new accountability reporting analysis system.

The urban principals were also similar to their rural counterparts in their concerns - over reliance on student achievement test scores in the model and the inability of a more highly centralized system to fully reflect the diversity in New Mexico communities.

Urban principals did demonstrate a greater level of familiarity with the financial award component of the new accountability system and the significance of the improvement school designation than their rural counterparts. The urban principals could more frequently identify schools within and outside their own school districts that had received financial awards.

Urban principals also differed from their rural counterparts in their perceptions of fairness in the system. The urban principals more frequently identified that the new system would fairly distribute financial awards.

General

Most personnel in rural and urban districts indicated that they had been informed about the changes in accountability by central staff in their own districts at meetings or via distributed materials. Some personnel had participated in NM State Department of Education meetings. However, understanding of the new accountability system varies considerably among the districts. It is clear that there is general understanding that the system for accountability has changed from district level of analysis to a school level of analysis in all districts and that the NM State Department of Education has assumed a more dominant role in accountability reporting is accurately perceived. However, the relationship of this greater centralization on the locally developed EPSS has not yet fully emerged.

School district personnel demonstrated a diversity of views about the perceived fairness of the financial awards system and the potential negative effects on equity in resource allocations.

among schools within a district and among school districts in the state.

The possibility that the designation of low performing schools as improvement schools will have negative effects on school personnel is likely to become a general concern in implementation of the new system. Improved communication about the positive aspects of additional funding resulting from being designated an improvement school may ameliorate this implementation challenge. However, it is difficult to envision how further improved communication can alter the perception among school principals that having a centralized NM State Department School Improvement Team descend on the school is punitive, rather than supportive, of locally developed school improvement plans.

There is nothing particularly surprising about these findings. It is not unexpected to find that it takes time for dissemination of policy and its implications to occur among the various levels of a complex hierarchical educational policy and service delivery system. However, the historical review of accountability reporting and educational goals policy examined in light of the findings of this study of school level personnel, reveal the varied influences of the multiple models that can be applied to the state policy system.

At the institutional level, policy makers demonstrate their concern for and interest in maintaining the perceived legitimacy of the system among their constituents. Those responsible for the pragmatic implementation of policy, state level bureaucrats, focus on the design of a rational system where technical and logistical concerns can be addressed. While problems of meaning may abound among the levels in the policy system, it is among the local school level personnel that policy as an interpretive problem is most strongly exhibited. The construction of

varied meanings about the policy among study participants was amply demonstrated.

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Appendix A - Interview Schedule

Hello, my name is _____ and I am a graduate student at NMSU working with Dr. Roberta Derlin in the Department of Educational Management and Development. We are asking you to participate in an interview regarding issues in accountability reporting in New Mexico. Your responses and comments will help us with our research which may at some future time be presented at a conference or published as a paper. No individual will be identified or quoted directly. Your conversation is confidential. We will be happy to send you a copy of any paper that is prepared.

Name of Person: Phone Number:
Position Title:
Years in this position:
Years in this district:
Years in K-12 Education:
Teaching/Professional History:
Mailing address if paper is requested:

First I want to explore with you some issues related to the NM School Report Card process.

How would you describe your position duties as they relate to the NM School Report Card process for your district/school:

What is your understanding of how the NM School Report Cards are used by your district/school:

Now I'd like to find out information about your understanding of some of the additional accountability reporting requirements that have been recently implemented in New Mexico.

Describe your understanding of the recent changes in accountability reporting and how these changes are affecting your district:

Can you describe how eligibility for financial rewards is determined?

Have you studied how regression works? Do you think the regression model used in the new system includes the important factors for your district?

Describe the important factors for your district that are missing, if any?

Were you informed in some official way about the new accountability reporting system that distributes financial rewards to some school? If so, How were you officially informed of the implementation of the new accountability reporting system?

How much information did you receive about the new accountability reporting system before its implementation?

If you weren't officially informed about the new system, how have you learned about the new system?

Have you been given or taken an opportunity to provide feedback to the NMSDE regarding changes in accountability reporting? If so, how were your comments received?

Do you anticipate these comments will influence implementation of the revised accountability reporting system? If so, what changes in implementation do you think/know will be made?

Do you feel the new accountability reporting system will benefit your school district?

Do you feel the new accountability system is an improvement over the former NM School Report Card system? Please explain

Do you feel each district and school has a fair chance to achieve recognition status and get a financial award?

Have any schools in your district achieved recognition status? If so obtain name of school and name of school principal. Do you know the amount of financial award the school received?

Any other comments on the changes in accountability reporting or its implementation?